

BIOGRAPHY AS ETHICS:  
A STUDY IN THE COMBAT BETWEEN RESPECT AND  
CONTEMPT IN THE MIND OF FELIX MENDELSSOHN

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*Abstract — Résumé*

In Aesthetic Realism, founded by Eli Siegel, a methodology exists through which biographers can understand the central ethical conflict in the life of every person: the fight between the desire to increase respect for the world and other people, or increase contempt for them. Felix Mendelssohn's life illustrates this. This paper focuses on his relations with his sister, Fanny; his teacher, Carl Friedrich Zelter; and the contemporary who most deeply troubled him—Hector Berlioz. In each instance, this question arose for Mendelssohn: whether to have more feeling, or less; welcome a larger notion of real-

ity, or be content with something more constrained. It is precisely the question that, in a technical form, was crucial to his art. In keeping with this, a hypothesis is presented concerning the *Italian Symphony* and Mendelssohn's inability ever to consider it finished. It is suggested that, unconsciously, his shame about indulging in contempt for the Italian people prevented him from appreciating his own work accurately.

**Key words:** Mendelssohn; Eli Siegel; Aesthetic Realism; *Italian Symphony*; Berlioz; Zelter; Fanny Mendelssohn; Contempt; Respect; Ethics; Biography

Whenever we do biographical study—especially as we try to relate a artist's life to his or her work—we enter into territory of great subtlety. It matters very much methodologically how we conceive of the human mind and its underlying motives. A biography written from a Freudian point-of-view will almost certainly differ greatly from a Marxian one. Through my study of the work of the great American philosopher Eli Siegel, I have come to see that in every mind a battle

goes on between two diametrically opposed purposes: a hope to increase respect for the world and other people, and a hope to enhance oneself through having contempt for them. I believe that understanding this central ethical conflict will enable us to do deeper and more insightful biography.

Before I go to the heart of this essay—and look directly at the life of the German romantic composer Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)—let me first give a richer sense of Eli Siegel's understanding of contempt and respect as primal forces in everyone's mind. In *Self and World: An Explanation of Aesthetic Realism*, which was written in the early 1940's, he wrote that »the basic object« of any practical science of mind:

is to enable a human organism to use all its energies without needless conflict. The self does not want to be strong by the weakness of others. It wants to be strong by what *it is*, rather than by what others are not. Wrongfully to be contemptuous of other human beings is inviting mental unhealth for oneself.<sup>1</sup>

And he continues with words that I see as particularly relevant for understanding the drama—the great success and also the painful limitations—of Mendelssohn as man and artist:

The fundamental, unremitting drive of every person is to be at one with things as a whole. To be at one with things as a whole carries with it some idea of power. And power is not just the ability to affect or change others; it is likewise the ability to be affected or changed by others. If a person's power is only of the first kind, his unconscious will be in distress.<sup>2</sup>

Contempt is the notion that the more we see the world as beneath us, unworthy of affecting us, the more elevated our opinion of ourselves becomes. The hope for contempt is thus the enemy of art—for art is a passionate search for meaning, value, and beauty. Nor is this merely a »modern« notion; evidence for it is richly present throughout the entire field of anthropology. One notable study along these lines is Arnold Perey's *Oksapmin Society and World View*.<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes an artist's emphasis is on looking where no one has before—a revolutionary emphasis. But art can also arise from the impulsion to show that what others dismiss as »old-hat« still has great life in it. This, largely, was Mendelssohn's way—respect, literally, in keeping with English etymology: to »look again.« As

<sup>1</sup> (New York: Definition Press. 1981). Page 275. This section of *Self and World* is entitled »Psychiatry, Economics, Aesthetics,« and was originally published in 1946 as an »Aesthetic Analysis Pamphlet« by the Society for Aesthetic Analysis, New York City.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* Page 276.

<sup>3</sup> Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University, 1973. See, in particular, chapters 10 and 13, dealing with the interacting of ethics, aesthetics, and individual psychology in this Neolithic New Guinean society.

Leon Botstein put it succinctly, a core principle for Mendelssohn was the »aesthetic of creative restoration.«<sup>4</sup>

Mendelssohn's passionate respect for Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and Haydn clearly did not curtail his originality; it set it free. When Johann Christian Lobe, editor of the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, praised the overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* saying it could not be »compare[d]...with any other piece; it has no sisters, no family resemblance,« Mendelssohn took him to task:

Not at all. In my overture I have not given expression to a single new maxim...You will find the very same maxims I followed, in the great overture to Beethoven's *Fidelio*.<sup>5</sup>

Mendelssohn had a fine fury when people acted as if gratitude for the achievements of the past was a burden to be sloughed off; and he comes close to describing contempt, as Aesthetic Realism sees it, when he wrote to Wilhelm Taubert from Lucerne on August 27, 1831:

...the first obligation of any artist should be to have respect for the great men and to bow down before them...and not to try to extinguish the great flames in order that his own small candle can seem a little brighter.<sup>6</sup>

This is keen ethical perception, and Mendelssohn was an ethical critic not just in relation to art but also life. He hated honorifics—words that set one person off as belonging to a socially »higher« caste than another. While affluent, he made it a point to live unpretentiously. He fought for higher salaries for his orchestral players—in keeping with their dignity as artists; and free tuition for music students. And when, in London in 1829, he heard of the suffering in Silesia from terrible and sudden floods, he put together a concert of the finest musicians in town—Sontag, Moscheles, Malibran, Douet—to raise funds to help the people there.

All this speaks of a sensitive and kind disposition, as do the many accounts by friends, including Chorley and Hiller, of his personal thoughtfulness and generosity. But Mendelssohn was—as people are—divided in his unconscious loyalties. There were limitations to his belief in the advantages of respect. For example, he was far more at ease finding value in people of the past than in his contemporaries. As Berlioz charmingly noted: »He is rather too fond of the dead.«

<sup>4</sup> »The Aesthetics of Assimilation and Affirmation: Reconstructing the Career of Felix Mendelssohn«, from: *Mendelssohn and His World*, ed. by R. Larry Todd. (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1991). Page 16.

<sup>5</sup> Originally Lobe's recollection of this statement by Mendelssohn (and more from a conversation between them) appeared in *Fliegende Blätter für die Musik* 1, no. 5 (1855). An English translation appears in TODD: 1991, and this particular statement is on page 194.

<sup>6</sup> TODD: 1991. Page 13.

Nor was this an occasional matter, easily written off as a temperamental lack of affinity with a certain artist. For Mendelssohn, upon meeting a person in whom others earlier had seen value, was too often impelled to dispute that value. To his credit, he was aware of this ethical shortcoming; in several letters he calls himself critically a »screech-owl.« But so given was he to pronouncements from the heights, his nickname in the family was »Sir Oracle.«

Paris, 1825 and 26. He meets many people; and far from regretting the weaknesses he thinks he observes, he relishes them. Rossini, he calls »the great Maestro Windbag.« Liszt has »lots of fingers, but little brain.« Cherubini is »an extinct volcano—almost entirely covered by ashes and slag.« Pasta has a voice »raw and unclear.« Auber and Meyerbeer, in his view, are almost »beneath criticism.« He writes of his mission to »convert Onslow and Reicha to a love for Beethoven and Sebastian Bach,« adding that »these people do not know a single note of *Fidelio* and believe Bach to be nothing but a wig stuffed with learning.« However this may have been as to Onslow—(and I think it unjust given Onslow's close association with Cramer, who was an early advocate both of Bach and Beethoven)—it is patently absurd as to Reicha, who loved Bach and taught his music at the Conservatoire, and who, as a teenager in Bonn, was the young Beethoven's closest musical friend, and who was living in Vienna at the time of the 1805 premiere of Beethoven's opera.

Fanny, the recipient of much of this writing, criticizes her brother for it, and his response shows he did not appreciate anyone—let alone someone close to him—interfering with his pleasure looking down on nearly everyone in Paris. On April 20, 1825, he writes:

Your last letter, dear Fanny, made me somewhat furious and I resolved to scold you a bit; nor will I let you off, although time, that kind divinity, has softened my temper and will pour balm into the wounds inflicted on you by my flaming wrath. You talk of prejudice and bias, about grumbling and scoffing...So think a little, I beg of you! Are you in Paris, or am I?<sup>7</sup>

In his essay, »Mendelssohn and Liszt,« William Little notes that for »someone of Mendelssohn's temperament« Liszt's popularity in Paris was especially »galling.«<sup>8</sup> Mendelssohn was used to being made much of as a »Wunderkind«—and here was another, and two years younger at that.

Plainly, there was an unhandsomely competitive component to Mendelssohn's temperament. Where did it begin? Likely very early in his life, when his family

<sup>7</sup> *Felix Mendelssohn: Letters*, ed. by G. Selden-Goth, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1945). Pages 32-33.

<sup>8</sup> *Mendelssohn Studies*, ed. R. Larry Todd. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). 1992. Page 108.

encouraged him to view himself as a superior being. Many of his friends do remark, in their memoirs, how quick he was to take offense when questioned. At times he could even fall into something like a paroxysm, frightening those around him—including his wife, Cécile.

Such hair-trigger reactions are not a sign that a person believes in himself as much as he would like. And we know from letters, such as one to Charlotte Moscheles on January 10, 1835, that his moods could sink quite low. »You know,« he tells her, »there are times when I think very little of myself.«

A person who was aware of how Mendelssohn's family may have weakened him was Zelter, who—in a letter to Goethe of November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1830—said:

By this time Felix is probably in Rome. I am very glad he is, because his mother was always against Italy. I feared he would be reduced to a jelly here in this country and in the midst of all the flatulent family gossip.<sup>9</sup>

The question that arises here is one of cause and effect. If we allow ourselves to be puffed up on a false basis—which is what flattery does—will our unconscious rebel against it, and result in a feeling low later?

This, as Aesthetic Realism sees is, is true for every person; we have an ethical unconscious.<sup>10</sup> But for an artist, like Mendelssohn, aware of how honorably and beautifully one's mind can be used, the division between that respectful orientation of self and the use of oneself with cheapness and ugliness to go after quick »contempt« victories is an even starker division, and hence far harder to bear.

When one sees the list of artists who were in the very first rank, all being demolished by Mendelssohn in his private correspondence, we can ask: was the hope for contempt impelling him? The first time he hears Malibran, he finds her singing on the edge of the »ridiculous and disagreeable.« The art of Turner—for whom Ruskin had such great regard—is a »most hideous smearing.« He sees Kemble, the leading Shakespearian do *Hamlet* and disapproves. He calls Donizetti's music »trash.« Paganini? »Eternal mawkishness.« Chopin? Mazurkas that are »so mannered...they are hard to stand.« Thalberg? »There isn't much more to [him] than a pretty hooked nose and stupendous fingers.«<sup>11</sup>

He reads Hugo's *Ruy Blas*, declares it »utterly beneath contempt,« and »de-testable,« yet proceeds swiftly to write an overture based on it. The overture certainly has musical value; none-the-less it has seemed to most critics, myself included, to be not among his greatest works, and also somewhat at odds with the

<sup>9</sup> *Gentle Genius: The Story of Felix Mendelssohn*, George R. Marek. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls. 1972). Page 127.

<sup>10</sup> See, in particular, chapter two of *Self and World: »The World, Guilt and Self-Conflict.«* (Pages 41-80.)

<sup>11</sup> While some of these scathing judgments Mendelssohn would later modify, what we are considering here is a disposition of self—a preference to lead with the hope to feel superior rather than the hope to find reason for respect.

emotional atmosphere of Hugo's important play. What Mendelssohn could do when he *was* in sympathy with a playwright is exemplified both by his magnificent Shakespearian music and also his remarkable setting of Goethe: *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*.

And, of course, there is the imaginative respect with which he deals with scripture. In the oratorios, there is fidelity and freedom at once. The same is true of the great *Hebrides* overture; that wild Scottish landscape penetrated him with its meaning, and evoked some of his most original and powerful musical thought.

Being affected by landscape and by literature however is one thing. By people—especially people clearly different from oneself—quite another. The subject of how Mendelssohn saw women is too large to consider properly in a short essay. But as an indication of a difficulty he had when it came to unencumbered respect for the intellectual powers of that half of humanity to which he did not belong, consider his response to Rahel Varnhagen—whom Goethe praised for her »exceptional mind« and called a »beautiful soul.«

Varnhagen was easily one of the most cultured women in Europe; her salon in Berlin was famous for its intellectual and artistic sophistication. Yet Heinrich Dorn recalls Mendelssohn saying she couldn't tell the difference between a set of variations by Czerny and a fugue by Bach. It simply wasn't true, and we need to consider why Mendelssohn, nevertheless, felt impelled to assert it. Perhaps there was an element of »family-competition,« since the Mendelssohns, likewise, kept a noted salon in the same city. Even so, the need to assert the superiority of one's own family over others is hardly a sign of a mind at ease with the reality of other people, and eager to respect them.

Contempt is ambitious. Once we enjoy holding individuals up to ridicule, it is a small step towards doing so with entire groups of people. Unfortunately, like many people both in his century and in our own, Mendelssohn was prone to this. He has various statements that sum up, in a rapid and disparaging manner, the French, the Italians and—later in his life—the people of Berlin. In 1831, he is in Italy. From Rome, on February 8, he writes his family about how »boring« it was to have to watch the Jewish people endure their annual supplication to the Pope to be allowed to live in their Ghetto. Perhaps it was, from a choreographic or literary point-of-view, »boring«—but it is painful to see the grandson of Moses Mendelssohn writing in such an aloof, cold manner about the humiliation of the Jews.<sup>12</sup> And it is also painful—painfully ironic—given the fact that posthumously Mendelssohn, beginning with Wagner's notorious »anonymous« pamphlet of 1850, *Das Judenthum in der Musik*, was himself a horrific victim of the contempt of anti-Semitism.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For an extensive and in-depth study of his difficulties placing himself in relation to his Jewish ancestry, see *The Price of Assimilation: Felix Mendelssohn and the Nineteenth-Century Anti-Semitic Tradition* by Jeffrey S. Sposato. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> This reached its peak during the Nazi era, when performances of his music were forbidden in lands they controlled.

It is plain that Mendelssohn drew great artistic inspiration from his Italian journey. One of his masterpieces is evidence: the *Italian Symphony*. And yet, he was strangely unsure of the piece—never publishing it. As is well-known, this has been something of a musicological mystery.

A question arises: could the source of the composer's unsureness not have been a musical issue fundamentally, but rather an ethical one—however unconscious? I mean by that: if we have contempt for the very thing, or the very people who have brought out our self-expression, feeling they are »not good enough« to have done so, will it create a conflict in us? Is suppressed gratitude always contempt?

Consider how disdainfully Mendelssohn, on June 6, 1831, writes home to his parents about the Neapolitans: »I cannot class the fishermen and lazzaroni among people; they are more like savages.« He also calls them animals. It is significant that Mendelssohn tells his family at this time that he feels depressed. Contempt, being a false road to a good opinion of oneself, does create self-doubt; even—when it goes far enough—self-loathing.

He has an inkling that there is something wrong going on inside him, but he swiftly tries to shake it off, telling his parents:

The source of my depression did not originate in me, as I had feared, but in the whole combination of air, climate, etc.<sup>14</sup>

It is not surprising, given this way of seeing Italy and Italians, that he says in a letter to Taubert that »music no longer exists among the people [there.]« This, amazingly, is in the same letter to Taubert I quoted earlier, in which he is so perceptive about the lure of contempt: the attractiveness of diminishing other people as a means of elevating oneself.

After speaking of the »airs of contempt« some people give themselves, he tells Taubert:

It vexes me to see that such folly still goes on, and that the philosopher who maintained that art is dead, still persists in declaring it so; as if art could ever die.<sup>15</sup>

Mendelssohn had no idea of how contradictory his letter was—and so, it is highly revealing of what I am speaking about: the combat in his mind, which he never resolved, between the hope to increase his respect for the world and people, and a hope to maintain contempt for them.

Earlier I mentioned the English etymology for respect. The German is equally suggestive—for the implication of »Hochachten« is that in the lesser moments of

<sup>14</sup> SELDON-GOTH: 1945. Page 130.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* Page 166.

our lives, we do not give reality the degree of attention it deserves. Here is a primal way in which Mendelssohn was very much an advocate of respect: he was an active amateur of the visual arts, doing many finely detailed drawings and watercolors; he translated, when still a youth, a lengthy work in Latin by Terence<sup>16</sup>—well enough to gain Goethe's approbation; he delighted in the vibrancy of London, writing his family, on May 1, 1829, that it makes »one's heart rejoice over the great world.«<sup>17</sup> And his musical memory was astonishing.

All this is respect for reality, for one doesn't welcome that kind of diversity into one's mind without a love for things, and a desire to cherish them. In his wide-ranging studies—not only of music, but of languages, the visual arts, and culture in general—we see in Mendelssohn a serious desire »to be at one with things as whole.« And Mendelssohn's courtesy, as well as his highly-developed sense of responsibility, were all signs of a mind, of a self, able to feel it could flourish through giving justice to other people.

The largest sign of his respect for reality, though, is the music—the sheer abundance of beauty he brought forth. He gave the world many extraordinary masterpieces. And not, as has been ignorantly suggested by some, all in his youth; the *Violin Concerto* is late; so is *Elijah*. And personally, as a composer, I am very much in sympathy with his model of »creative restoration«—and I think it has much relevance for the future.

But I also think a study of the mind of Mendelssohn along the lines I am proposing, will have another kind of relevance—and perhaps even deeper. Certainly wider. For while musical issues interest professionals, ethical issues interest everyone. Meanwhile, the issues are not truly divided—as Mendelssohn himself grasped. As he wrote to Devrient on June 19, 1829: »Life and art are not two separate concepts.«

The most subtle issue in musical biography is the relation between a composer's attitude towards the world and the music he or she creates. And while we need to be cautious about making any swift one-to-one relation between an ethical weakness in a person and a limitation of expression, it nevertheless remains true that a fear of taking on life and reality in their full depth and dimension, never helps an artist—or a critic; and to the extent a person justifies this fear by a snobish or academic rationalization, that person injures himself.

Most revealing in this regard is how Mendelssohn thought of Berlioz. To his mother he writes, »If he weren't a Frenchman, I couldn't stomach him at all.« He declares Berlioz to be »without a spark of talent.« To Ignaz Moscheles, who was a mutual friend, he writes:

<sup>16</sup> The play *Andria*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* Page 48.



[His] instrumentation is so frightfully filthy, such a confused mess, that you want to wash your hands after merely holding one of his scores in your hand.<sup>18</sup>

And in a letter to Hiller, the *Sinfonie Fantastique* is called »insipid, wearisome, and Philistine.«<sup>19</sup>

Intelligence, Eli Siegel has described, as »the ability of a self to become one with the new.«<sup>20</sup> Mendelssohn was not intelligent about Berlioz. He was, of course, under no obligation to follow the Frenchman's path—but unlike Schumann, who thoughtfully wrote of Berlioz in terms of musical glories and weaknesses, Mendelssohn saw only the flaws.

What a loss! For Berlioz, in his tumultuousness, his warmth, his daring—both as man and artist—could have brought to the somewhat restrained and often too fastidious Mendelssohn something he needed very much: a lack of fear about the wildness of reality; pleasure in perceiving its non-symmetry; delight in its power to shock. As Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl noted five years after the composer's death: »[he] often composed like a diplomat.«<sup>21</sup>

Had Mendelssohn joined that emotion—that rough, unconfined emotion about life—to what he already felt, his vision of reality would have been deeper, larger, and more complete. More, in fact, like the vision which impelled the composer he admired most: Beethoven—a sovereign master of musical form, but who nevertheless wrote »on the edge,« with a sense so often of pushing coherence to the very limits of incoherence: a sense that the disorder of reality could make an aesthetic one with its orderliness.

Ill at ease with that feeling—a feeling for »things as a whole,« not just for things one feels comfortable with—Mendelssohn was able to praise lesser energies, like Gade, but found it difficult to praise Wagner, Schumann, or Berlioz. And even with Chopin the lingering impression is that it was the pianism more than the compositional power he cared for.

Did this hurt him? I believe so. Great as his musical accomplishments were, they could have been even greater. He was unable to learn from people who had much to teach him.

When Mendelssohn's *Reisebriefe* were published in 1861, Berlioz, who had to read the sentiments I quoted above, was hurt by them. And one remembers the pain in the Mendelssohn family when, in 1833, Zelter's correspondence with Goethe was published, and revealed some anti-Semitic language on the part of Felix's boyhood teacher.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in *Felix Mendelssohn and His Times*, Heinrich Eduard JACOB; translated by Richard and Clara Winston. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall. 1963). Page 97.

<sup>19</sup> *A Portrait of Mendelssohn*, Clive BROWN. (New Haven: Yale University Press. 2003). Page 318.

<sup>20</sup> From *Definitions and Comment: Being a Description of the World*. The book is not yet published, though this particular definition appears in issue 310 of the journal *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known*. (March 14, 1979). Page 2.

<sup>21</sup> TODD: 1991. Page 17.

The hope for contempt does poison the world. And so, it is critical that we—as persons interested in the art of biography—understand it, and make the understanding of it part of our scholarship. I think we honor Mendelssohn as we try to see his mind as it truly was: a representative human mind; a mind in a combat between those two great forces—contempt and respect.

*Sažetak*

BIOGRAFIJA KAO ETIKA.  
ISTRAŽIVANJE SUKOBA IZMEĐU POŠTOVANJA I PRIJEZIRA U SVIJESTI FELIXA  
MENDELSSOHN

Najvažniji i istodobno najosjetljiviji aspekt znanosti o glazbi je odnos između skladateljeva stava spram svijeta i glazbe koju on ili ona stvaraju. Je li u svijesti Felixa Mendelssohna postojala borba — koju nisu razumjeli njegova obitelj, prijatelji i kolege — između nade u povećanje poštovanja prema svijetu i drugim ljudima i težnje da opravda prijezir prema njima? I je li želja da se prepusti neopravdanom prijeziru naškodila ne samo njegovu životu nego i njegovoj glazbi?

»U svakoj osobi postoji predispozicija«, napisao je veliki američki filozof Eli Siegel, »da misli da ćemo biti toliko više za sebe koliko zanemarimo vanjski svijet«. Umjetnost je u Mendelssohnu proizašla iz želje da ne popusti toj predispoziciji, a bol u njegovu životu od prepustanja njoj, uključujući i iznenadne napade gnjeva koji su toliko plašili njegove prijatelje i njegovu suprugu.

U Mendelssohnovoj obitelji raspravljalo se o pitanjima vjerskog identiteta, ekonomskih privilegija, nacionalizma i mjesta žena u društvu. Sva su ona pridonosila zbrci u pitanju o tome koja je emocija privlačnija, prijezir ili poštovanje? Ovaj se članak usredotočuje na Mendelssohnov odnos s njegovom sestrom Fanny, njegovim učiteljem Carlom Friedrichom Zelterom i njegovim suvremenikom koji ga je najviše uznemiravao — Hectorom Berliozom. Navedeni problem javljao se za Mendelssohna u svakoj prilici: prepustiti se više ili manje osjećajima; dopustiti snažniju predodžbu o stvarnosti ili se zadovoljiti s nečim ograničenijim. Upravo je ovo pitanje u tehničkom obliku bilo ključno za njegovu umjetnost.

Postavlja se hipoteza u vezi s Mendelssohnovim problematičnim stavom spram vlastite *Talijanske simfonije*, odnosno njegove nemoći da je shvati kao dovršenu, kojom se sugerira da ga je njegov stid zbog blagosti iskazane vlastitu prijeziru prema Talijanima spriječio da ispravno procijeni vlastito djelo. U okvirima temeljne etike mi ne možemo prihvatiti neispravni prijezir prema svijetu, a da u nekom obliku ne umanjimo vlastitu sposobnost da istinski shvatimo sama sebe.

U estetičkom realizmu — filozofiji koju je utemeljio Eli Siegel — postavljena je po prvi put metodologija kojom biografii mogu jasno razumjeti središnji etički sukob u životu svake osobe: sukob između prijezira i poštovanja. To razumijevanje omogućit će muzikolozima u budućnosti da pišu dublje i oštromnije biografije.